

TFTD 23.17. Monday March 13

Matt 13.1-35

Going for growth



Pilgrims walking along the edge of a field, above the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus said, The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest garden plant and becomes a tree, so that birds of heaven come and nest in its branches. Matthew 13.31-32

Matthew 13 is a chapter of parables, all turning in one way or another on small things that turn out much bigger than you expect. This is Jesus' third block of teaching (it begins with Jesus sitting down and teaching a large crowd: vv.1-2). And it's all about taking risks, and succeeding against all the odds.

Like other preachers of his day, Jesus used story-telling, riddles and illustrations to bring his message to life with vivid stories from everyday life. He used parables in a provocative way, to challenge his hearers: just because the meaning is not always obvious, it draws you in and makes you think. Parables are like poetry: they invite us into a more profound exploration. They can't just be 'cashed out' into a simple 'meaning'.

Kenneth Bailey puts it this way in *Jesus through Middle-Eastern Eyes* (SPCK, 2008, p.280): A parable is an extended metaphor and as such it is not a delivery system for an idea but a house in which the reader or listener is invited to take up residence. Leith Fisher puts it this way: Here's a wee story. Let it work in you, work on you. Think about it, brood over it talk about it. Maybe the story itself will be like the good seed in the sower story, giving a return out of all proportion to its size.

The parable of the sower (vv.3-23) follows on naturally from the controversies of ch.12. We've just seen how different the responses to Jesus could be — all the way from acceptance to outright rejection. Not surprising, Jesus says — just think of a farmer, sowing his seed broadcast across a wide field. It's all good seed, but it has to contend with some pretty hostile terrain. Some of it will be eaten by the birds; some will fall on the rocky ground where it can't put down roots; some will be choked by thorns. Only one seed in four will find fertile soil and succeed in germinating — but from those few

seeds, the farmer can get a yield of 30, 60 or 100 times what he put in.



Or take the mustard seed (vv.31-32). It's tiny — so small the wind could blow it out of your hand. But drop it in the right corner of the garden, and it'll be the biggest thing in the vegetable patch. Yeast is like that (v.33) — a tiny germ of life that makes all the difference between a lump of soggy dough and a freshly-risen loaf.



What's the point of these parables? Simple examples taken from everyday life —farming, gardening, cooking. All designed to make you think about what it's like when the kingdom of heaven breaks into our lives. It's about something that looks small, but has a huge impact — something that looks dead, but has enormous potential for growth and transformation. Even the tiniest speck of heaven has the potential to change the world — if we'll let it.

And there's the rub. Growth needs two things — good seed, and good soil. God supplies the seed, but we have to supply the right conditions for the seed to grow. The parable of the sower suggests many different ways in which we can stunt the growth of the kingdom: early enthusiasm snuffed out by opposition, or competing

voices, or just “the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches” (vv.19-22). Too many Christians hear the word, but never let it sink in and take root.

Plant a sunflower seed for Lent. Watch it and care for it — and watch it grow! Ask God to plant the seeds of his Kingdom in you and in me.

God bless, Loveday

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